

“A Fresh Look at Christmas through the Eyes of Mary”

Luke 1:26-56

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Well, it's almost Christmas again. Can you believe it? People are already putting up their lights, sending their Christmas cards, maxing out their credit cards. If you're anything like me, each year you start off with the best of intentions to celebrate Christmas for its true meaning, but each year worldly forces conspire to distract you from doing just that, so that by the time Dec. 25 arrives you just want it to be over.

So for Advent this year, I thought we'd go back to the basics with Christmas. We've seen Christmas in so many different ways, but we may not have seen it from the perspective of the original participants. We

know what Christmas means in our culture, the bad and the good; but what did Christmas mean to Mary and Joseph and the shepherds? My hope is by seeing the miracle of Christmas through their eyes, we might gain a new perspective of our own, a chance to break free from our culture's materialistic grip on Christmas and reclaim Christmas for what it means to our hearts, not our pocketbooks and blood pressure.

Today in our scriptures we visited with Mary and her relative Elizabeth. We've heard this story so many times that it's easy to tune out when it's read. We know who Mary is, right? The Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Catholic influence in

our culture has helped solidify Mary's place in our religious vernacular, a place so lofty it sometimes rivals that of God.

That's what happened for one little boy. You see, he wanted a bicycle very badly. All his friends had one. After begging his mother repeatedly, she suggested he take his concerns to the Holy Mother Mary in prayer. So the boy wrote out his prayer on a piece of paper before he went to bed, and prayed, "Mary, mother of God, could you please give me a bicycle? All my friends have one. Amen." He placed the prayer under his statue of the Virgin Mary next to his bed and went to sleep.

The next morning, he woke full of excitement, but no bicycle. Undaunted, he repeated the same steps that night, and

every night for a week, but with the same results. Finally, he took the statue of Mary, wrapped it in a towel, and hid it in the back of his closet. When he went to sleep that night, he prayed:

"Dear Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother again, you better fork over that bike!"

As the mother of Jesus, Mary has had that kind of power down through history. Famous artists have rendered her in fine silk clothes with flowing hair and an angelic face. Statues of Mary can be found almost anywhere from fireplace mantels to front lawns to the statue called Our Lady of the Millennium, a 33-foot tall stainless steel statue of Mary that weighs 8400 pounds and is transported from Catholic church to Catholic church by flatbed truck.

So it's interesting to contrast Mary as a figure of power and authority with the Mary pictured in our texts today. She hardly comes across as a figure worthy of a statue: a poor, young, teenage girl engaged to a local carpenter. Growing up, she had been taught a rigid code of standards and values. The model of womanhood held up by her society calls for a woman to be the wife of a God-fearing Jewish man, the mother of his children, and the maker of a loving and law-abiding home for her family. That's her ideal situation, and as far as she knows that's what lies ahead for her.

Until the angel Gabriel appears and announces that God has other plans. We know something is up when Gabriel speaks to her directly; in Jewish

tradition, women in general, and especially young unmarried girls, were never directly greeted. The angel tells Mary that she will give birth to a son, and she is to name him Jesus. And her son will become a king, and his kingdom will never end.

Now, the implications of this announcement for Mary are staggering. First, she was young, poor, and female, all characteristics that people of her day would say made her utterly unusable by God. Second, her pregnancy would mean all kinds of trouble. She has to explain this to her fiancé, who will probably not believe her. She'll have to face her community as unwed and pregnant, setting her up for merciless ridicule. And, because of this transgression, she could, by law, be stoned to death. Mary's whole future is

drastically rearranged by this announcement.

“How can this be?” Mary asked, and that is all she asked, but there are several other questions I would have asked, such as: What’s going to happen? Will Joseph stick around? Will my parents still love me? Will my friends stand by me or will I get dragged into town and stoned for sleeping around? Will the pregnancy go all right? Will the labor be hard? Will there be someone to help me when my time comes? Will I know what to do? Why me? Christmas for Mary meant anxious questions with few answers.

God could have chosen a queen or a princess or an aristocratic heiress, but He doesn’t. He chooses a poor peasant girl who brings nothing

on her resume but her availability and her willingness to serve. Mary is one of the lowest of the low, and yet through God’s power and God’s choosing she will be exalted.

Is it any surprise that Mary was frequently referred to in the spirituals sung by Southern slaves in the 1800s? She has been for millions of people the symbol of hope and courage in the time of greatest need. Through this episode she becomes the patron saint of the powerless little people, the shining example that God can take even the most earthen vessel and turn it into a container for the divine.

Still, the miracle of Christmas for Mary was one laced with uncertainty. Mary never sought motherhood, had many good reasons to resist the

invitation from God, but she accepted her mission with all its mystery and complexity, and she proceeded into uncharted territory armed with nothing more than faith and obedience.

“I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Mary’s answer to the angel represents a bold statement of faith with a level of commitment and obedience not found anywhere else in the Bible. Her “yes” was the crucial turning point in God’s salvation plan. Her faith made possible God’s entry into history, the Word becoming flesh. There are a lot of unanswered questions that could have prompted her to say no: not the right time, not the right place, not the right partner, not the right family planning, not the right future plans. And yet, instead of

weighing the pros and cons, instead of counting the costs, she simply says yes.

That doesn’t mean she wasn’t scared, that her voice didn’t tremble as she gave her answer. Who among us is not as fearful as Mary was when God demands our attention in a way we can no longer ignore? The missionary en route to a foreign country, the student stepping through the seminary doors for the first time, the congregation member leading their first meeting or holding the communion trays for the first time all know the fear that goes with saying “yes” to God’s call.

But like Mary, they also know the reward, the joy of being God’s servant. Mary visits her relative Elizabeth and almost bursts with her song we know as the Magnificat, the longest set of

words placed on the lips of any woman in the entire New Testament. Both women in this scene are overflowing with the joy of new life, the joy of saying yes to God's call.

They are, in every sense of the word, expecting. They are not only expecting biologically; they are expecting theologically. They are expecting in their wombs and in their spirits. Pastor David Shirey says they are "running their fingers through the prospects of promises fulfilled."

Notice Mary's song: though God's promises to her have yet to be fulfilled, she sings about them in the past tense! "He has brought down rulers from their thrones and lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but sent the rich away empty." Mary

has not only said "yes" to God, but she is expecting God's promises to be fulfilled. We don't expect something that we don't think will happen. We expect something will happen because we believe, in our hearts, that it will.

To be expecting is one of the blessings of Advent. As we await Christ's coming, we are all expecting, just as Mary and Elizabeth. And our role in this drama being played out is in some ways just as important. Listen to these words from medieval mystic and theologian Meister Eckhart: "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place each year but does not take place within myself? And what good is it to me that Mary is full of grace if I am not

full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and culture?”

God has a plan to use each one of us to make his love known here on earth. He comes to each of us this Christmas and says, “Jesus Christ is inside you. Will you give birth to his love in your life? Will you share him with others? Will you share him with the world?”

“May it be to me as you have said” – if that could be our response to the coming of Christ this Christmas, then his birth would not merely be remembered but truly received. We may not fully know what his birth will mean in our lives, but we can trust in God’s promises and God’s plan to use us for his kingdom work. That’s more than

just a Christmas wish; it’s what we should be expecting.